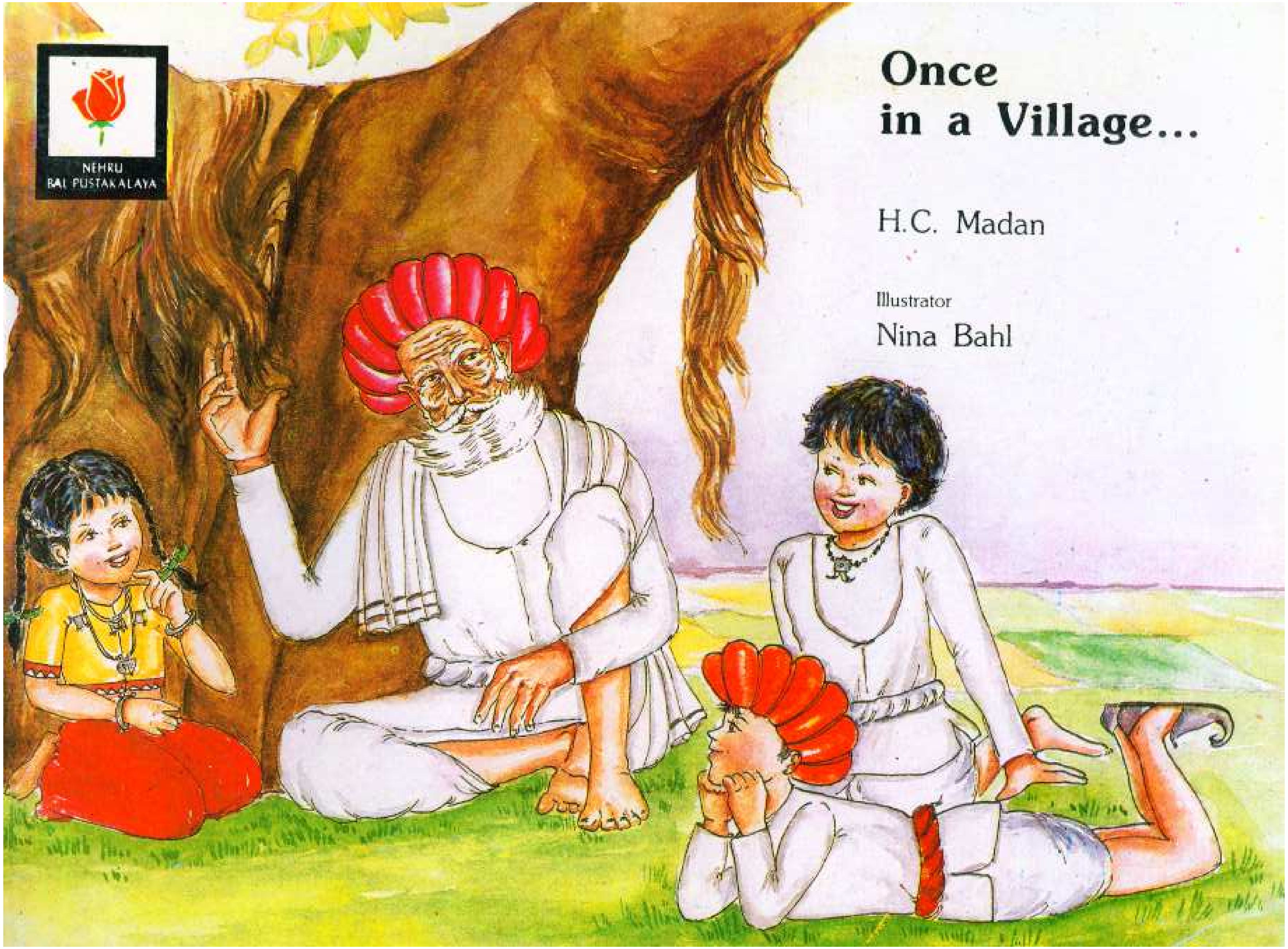
NEHRU
BAL PUSTAKALAYA

Once in a Village...

H.C. Madan

Illustrator
Nina Bahl



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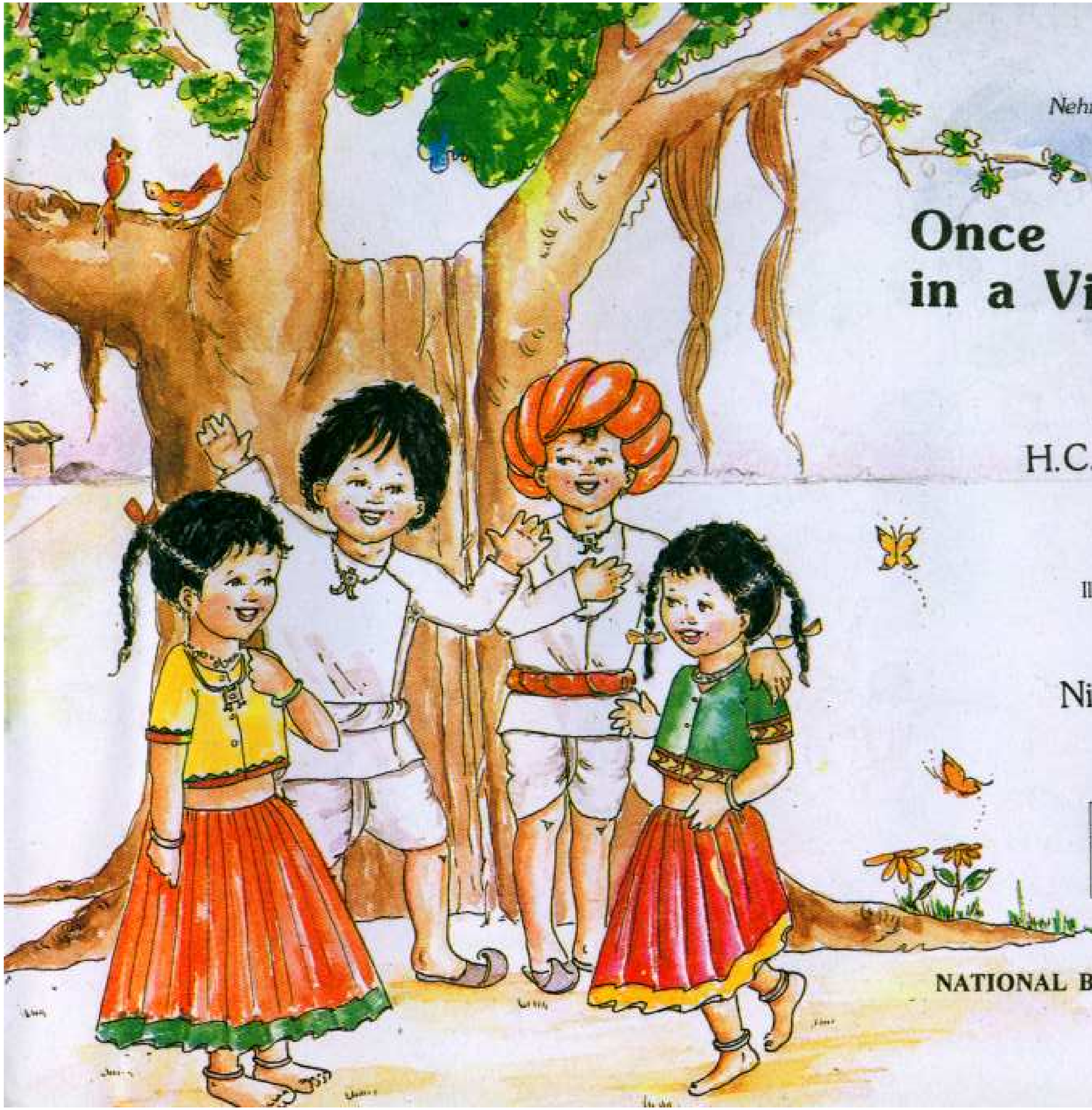

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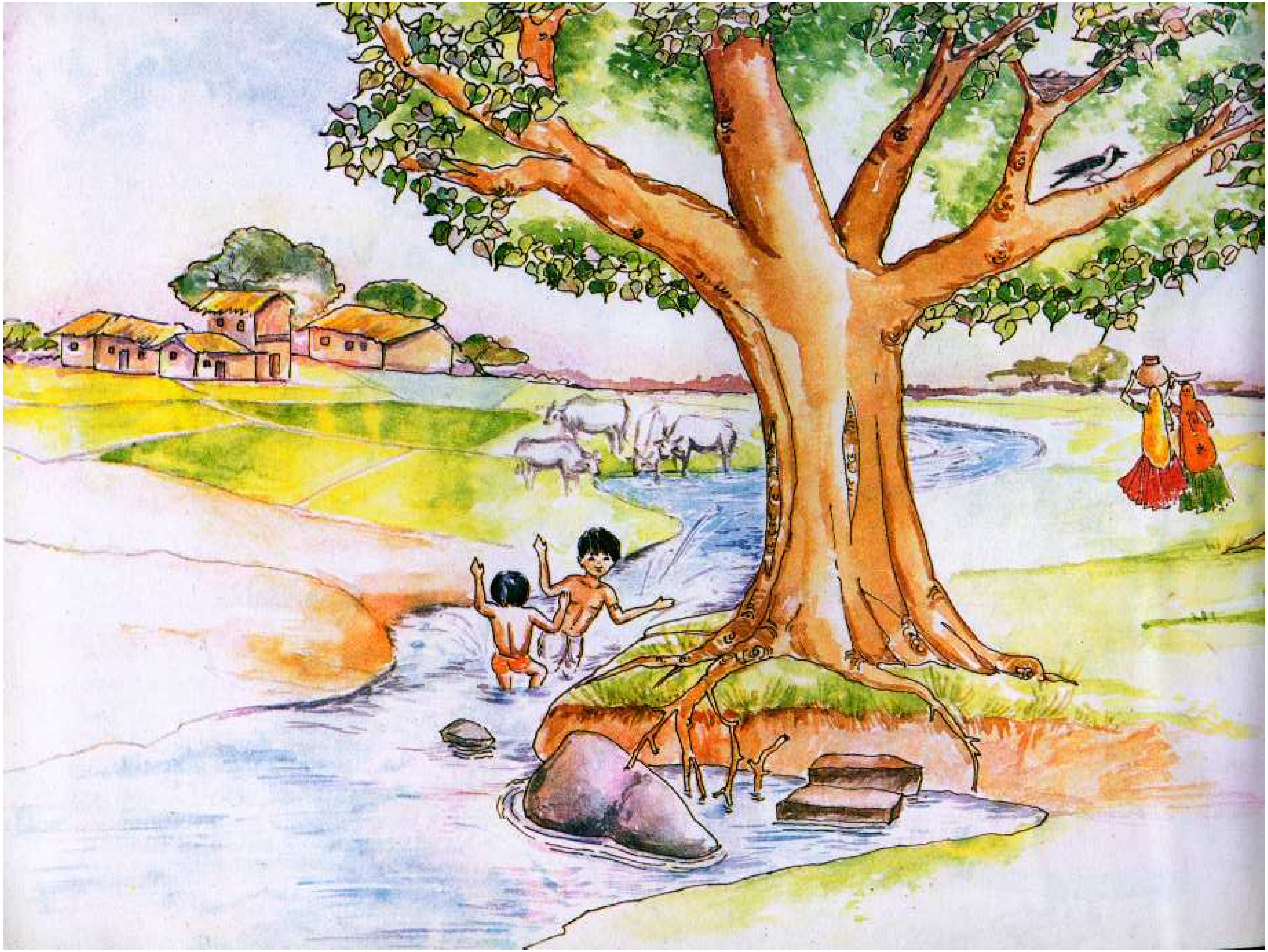
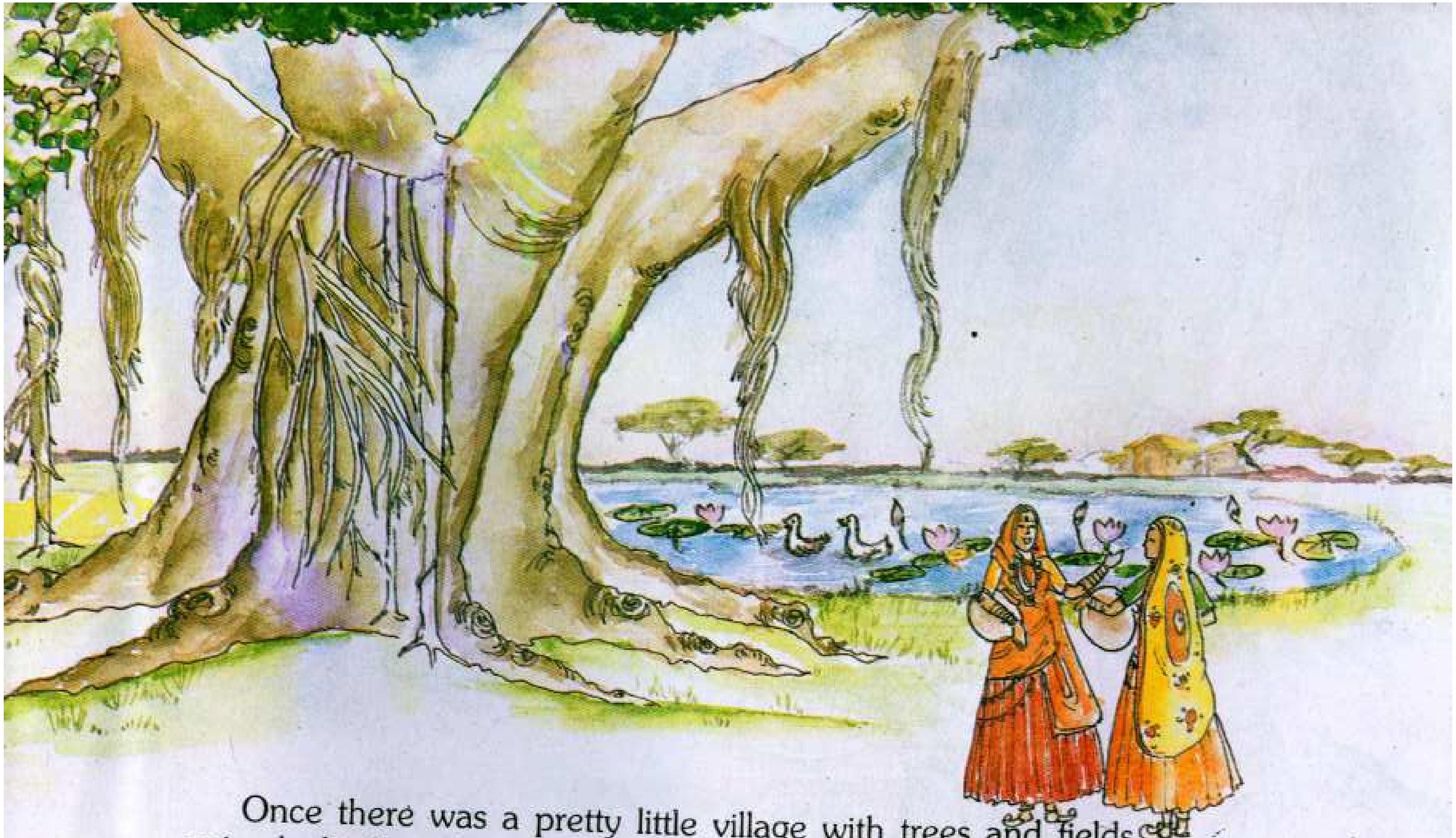
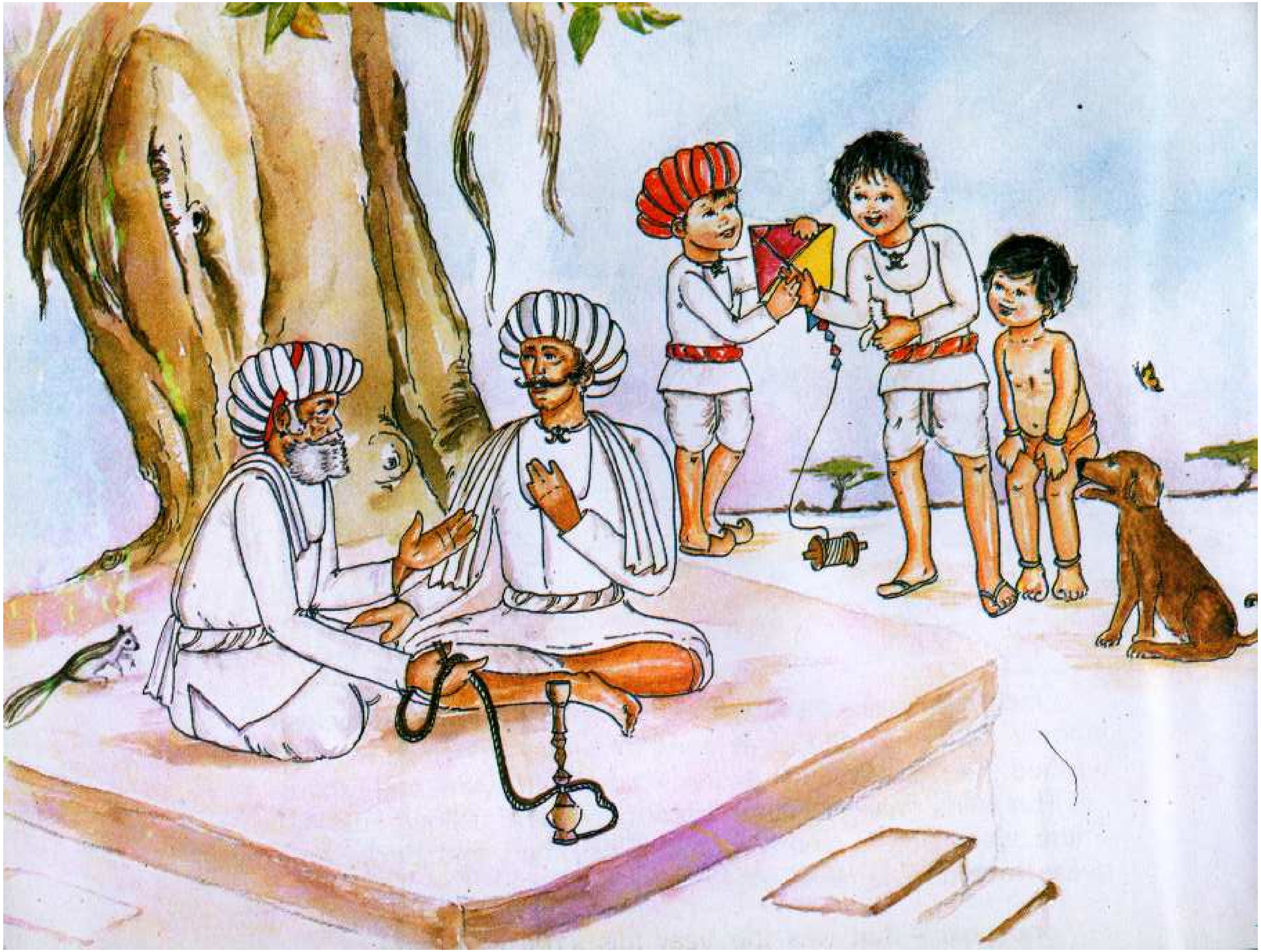
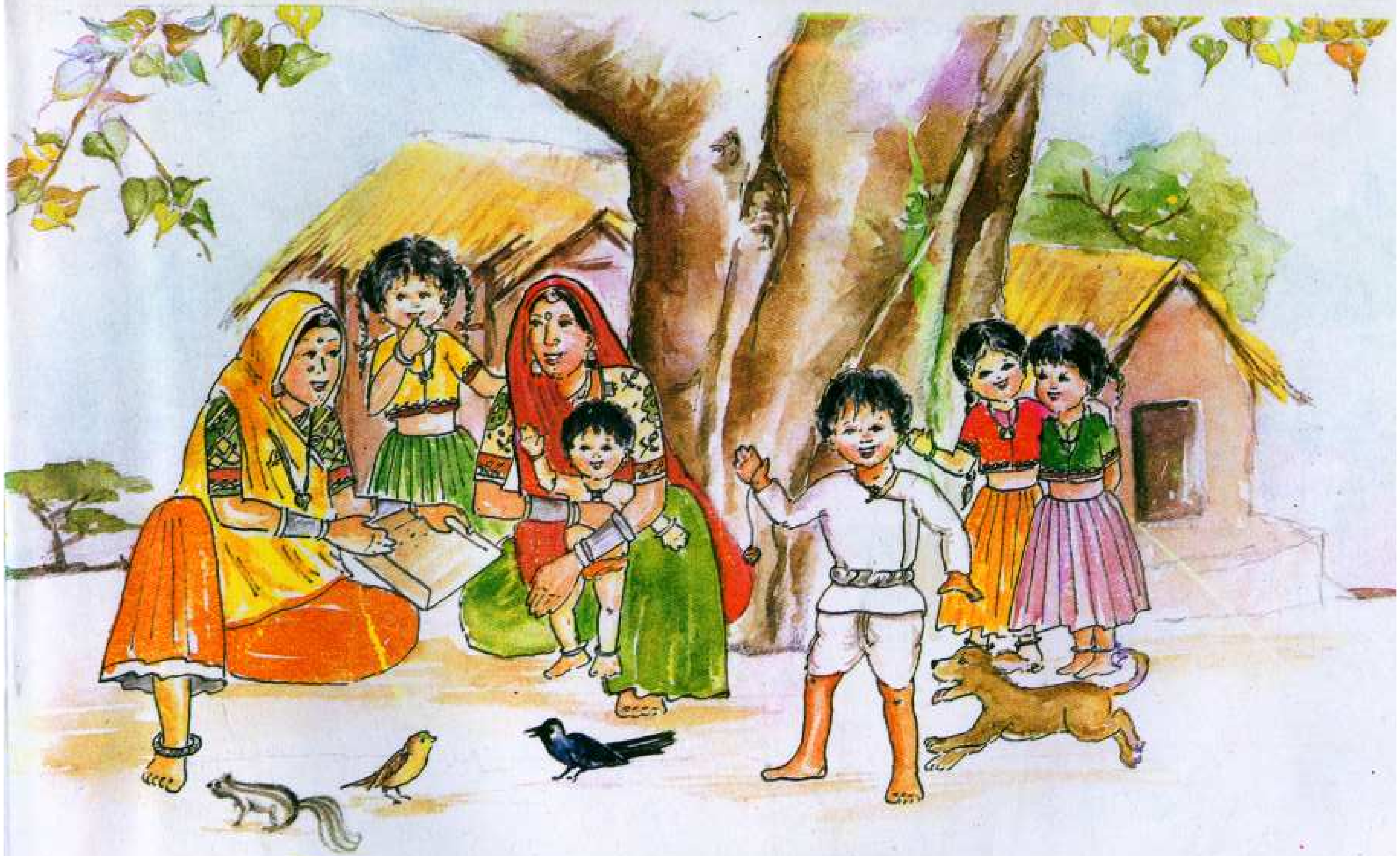




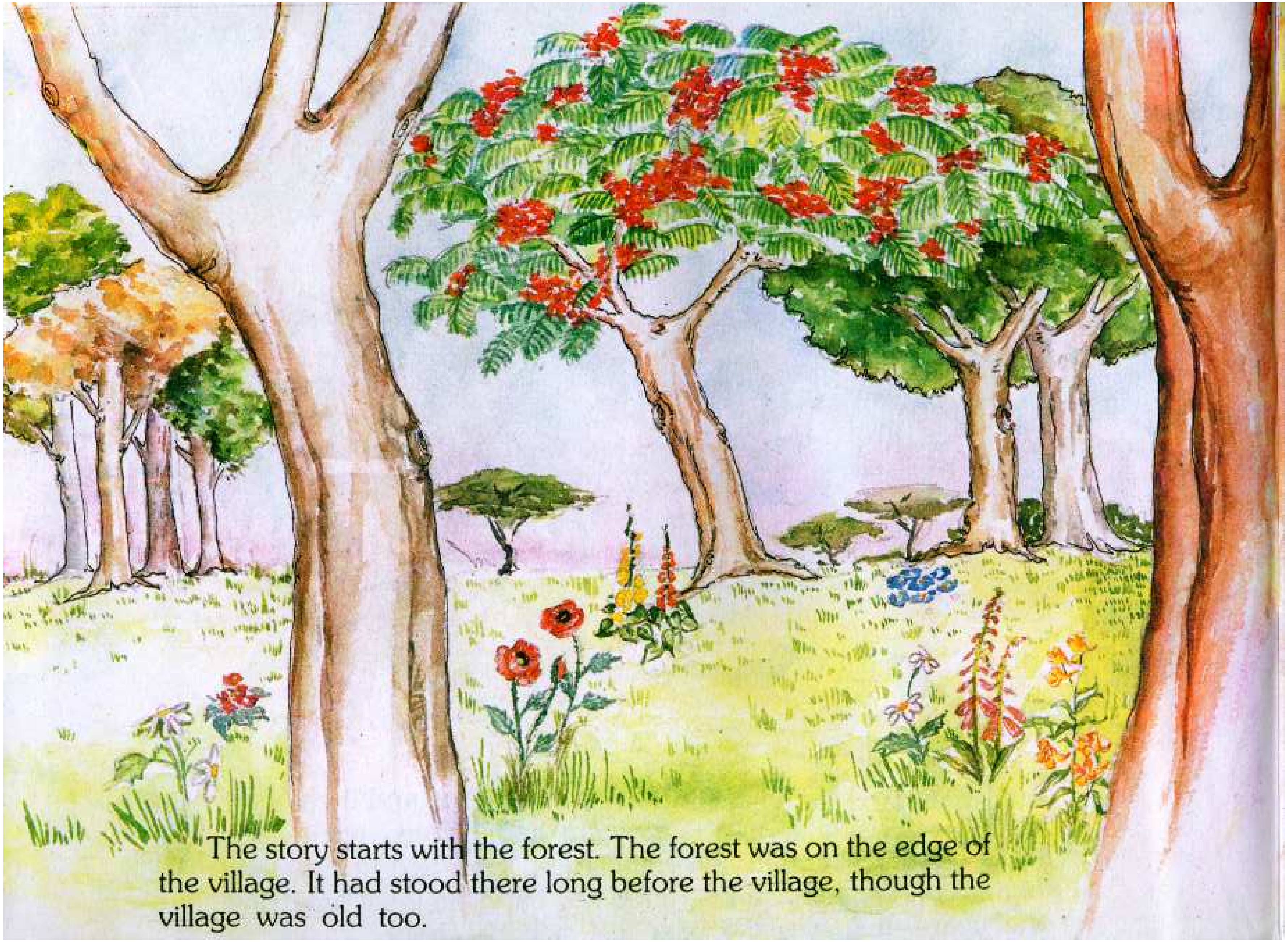
Once there was a pretty little village with trees and fields, animals, birds and people. It stood by a river, in which women washed their clothes and children waded and swam and fished.

The fields grew paddy and groundnut and yellow mustard. There were ponds where lotuses blossomed and ducks and geese and frog families made their homes.

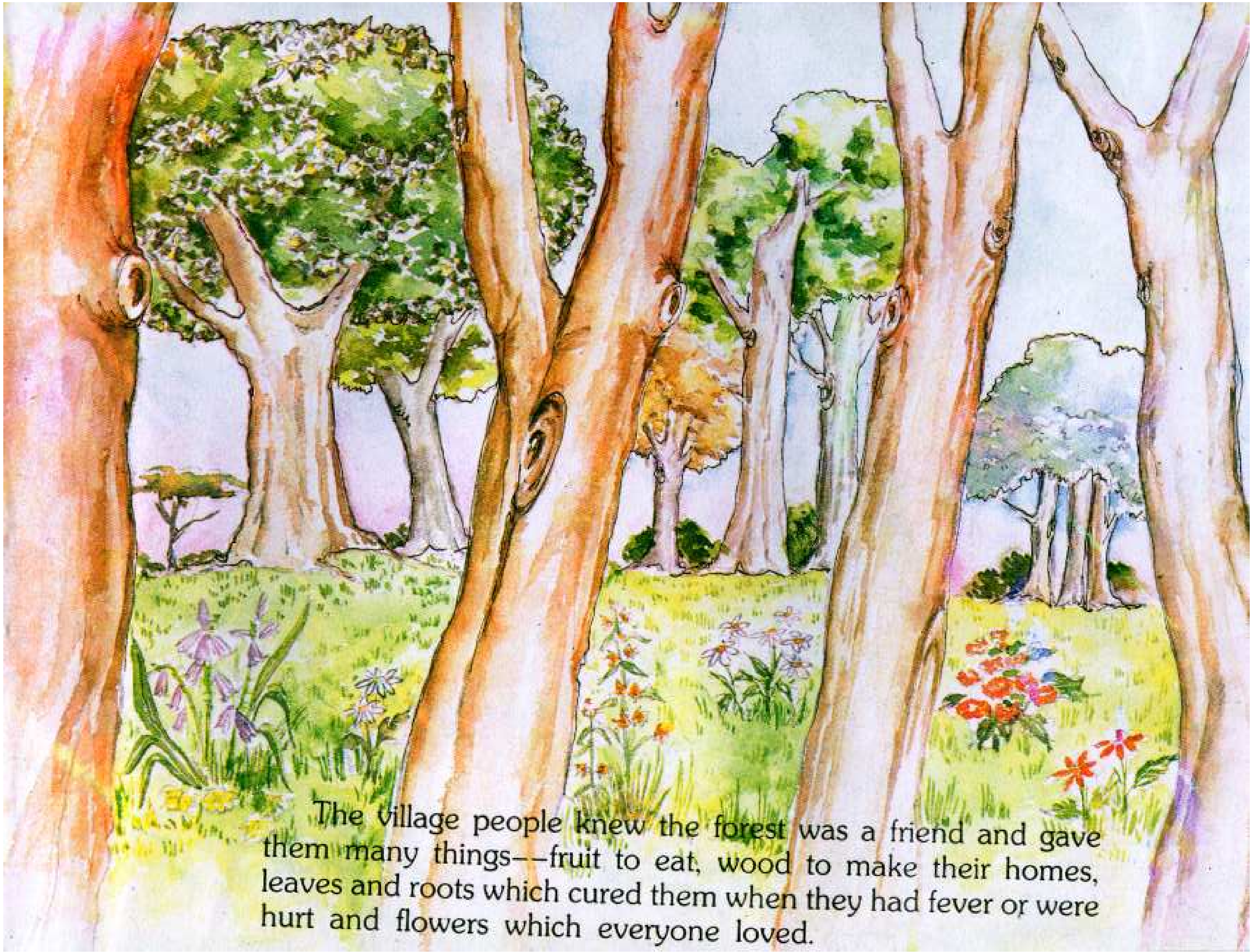




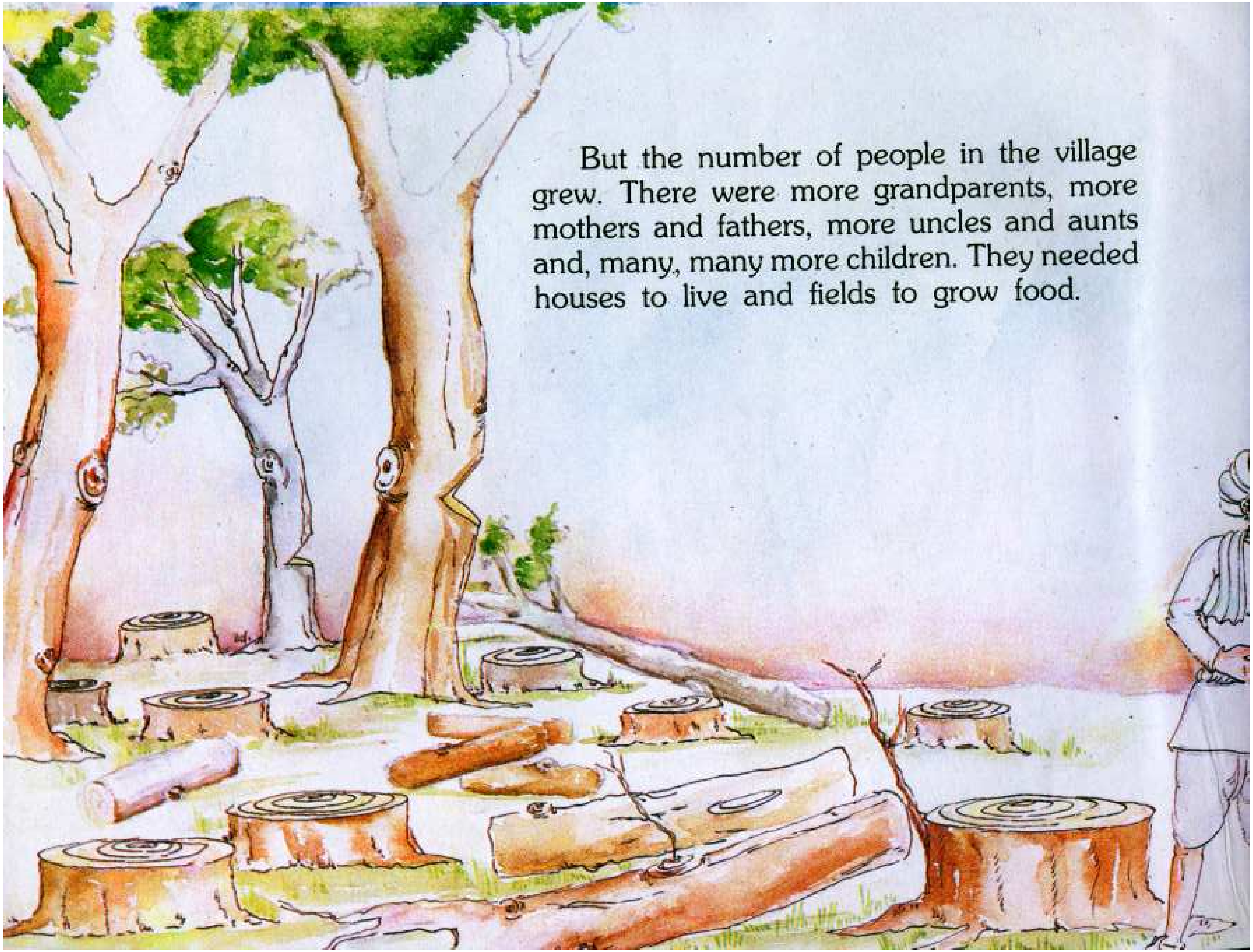
There were animals and birds in the village and there were people—old grandparents, mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts. And children of different ages, sizes and shapes and degrees of naughtiness. Everyone was happy in the village, until one year—that was the year this story is about.



The story starts with the forest. The forest was on the edge of the village. It had stood there long before the village, though the village was old too.



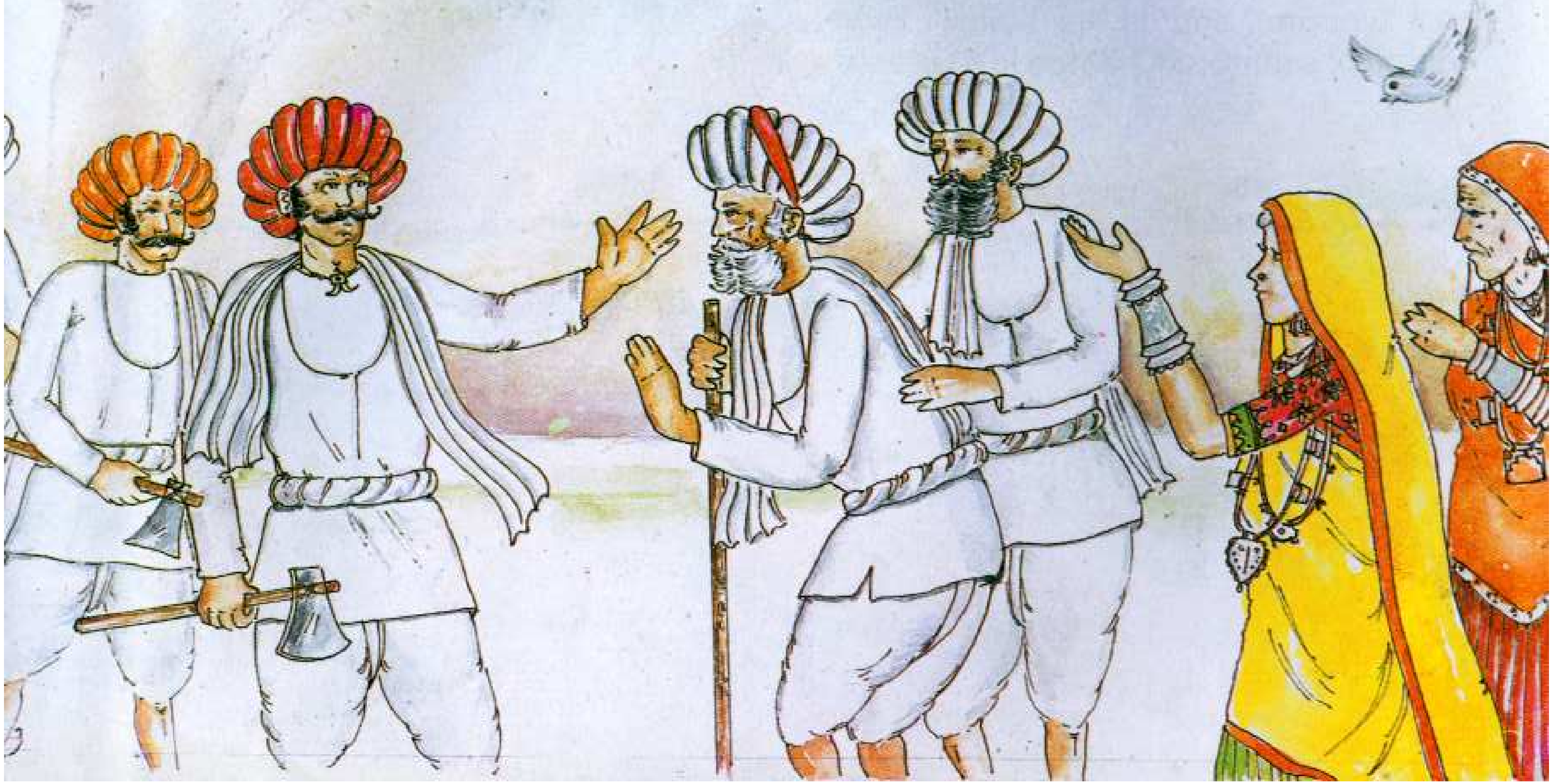
The village people knew the forest was a friend and gave them many things—-fruit to eat, wood to make their homes, leaves and roots which cured them when they had fever or were hurt and flowers which everyone loved.



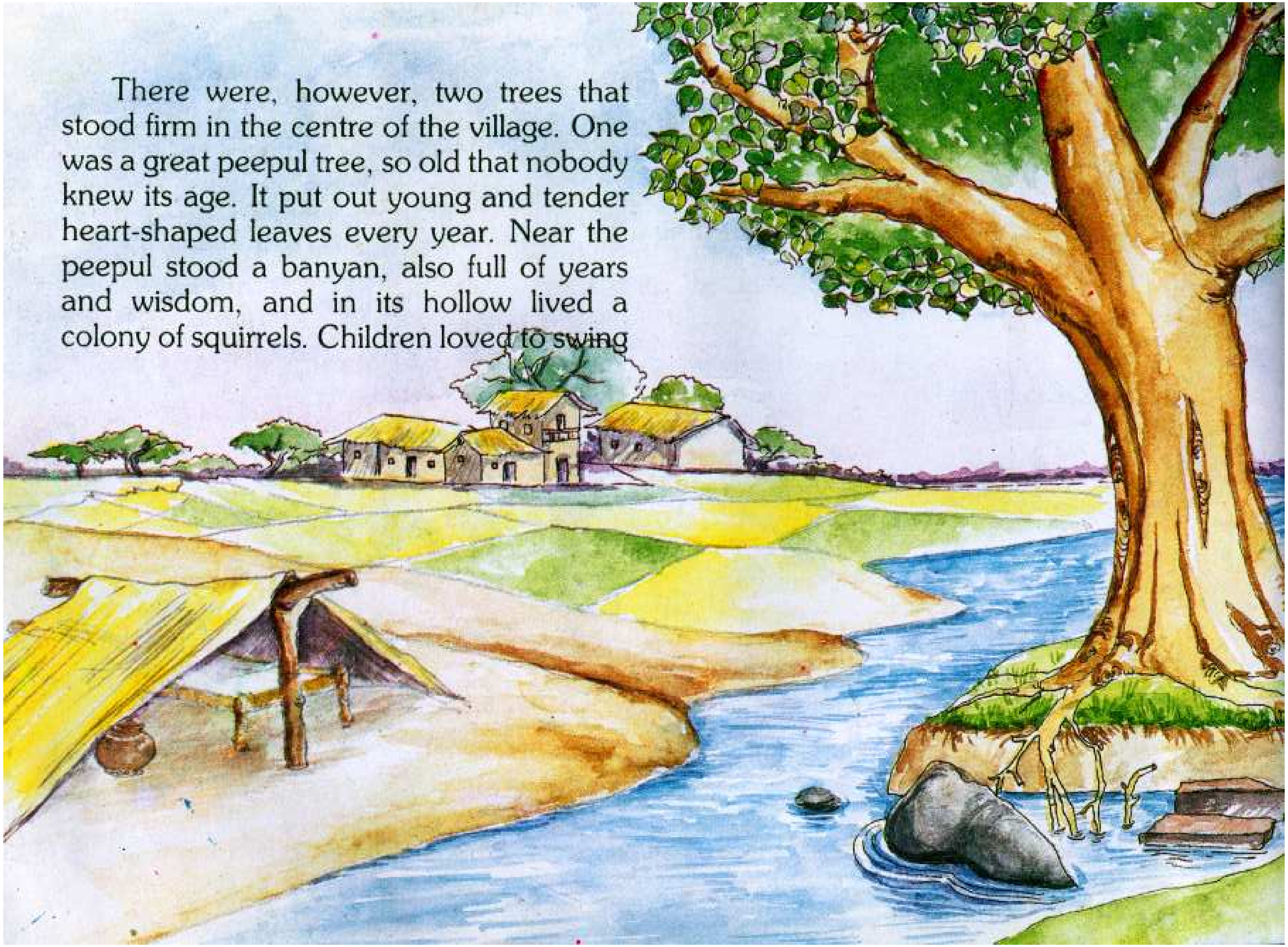
But the number of people in the village grew. There were more grandparents, more mothers and fathers, more uncles and aunts and, many, many more children. They needed houses to live and fields to grow food.

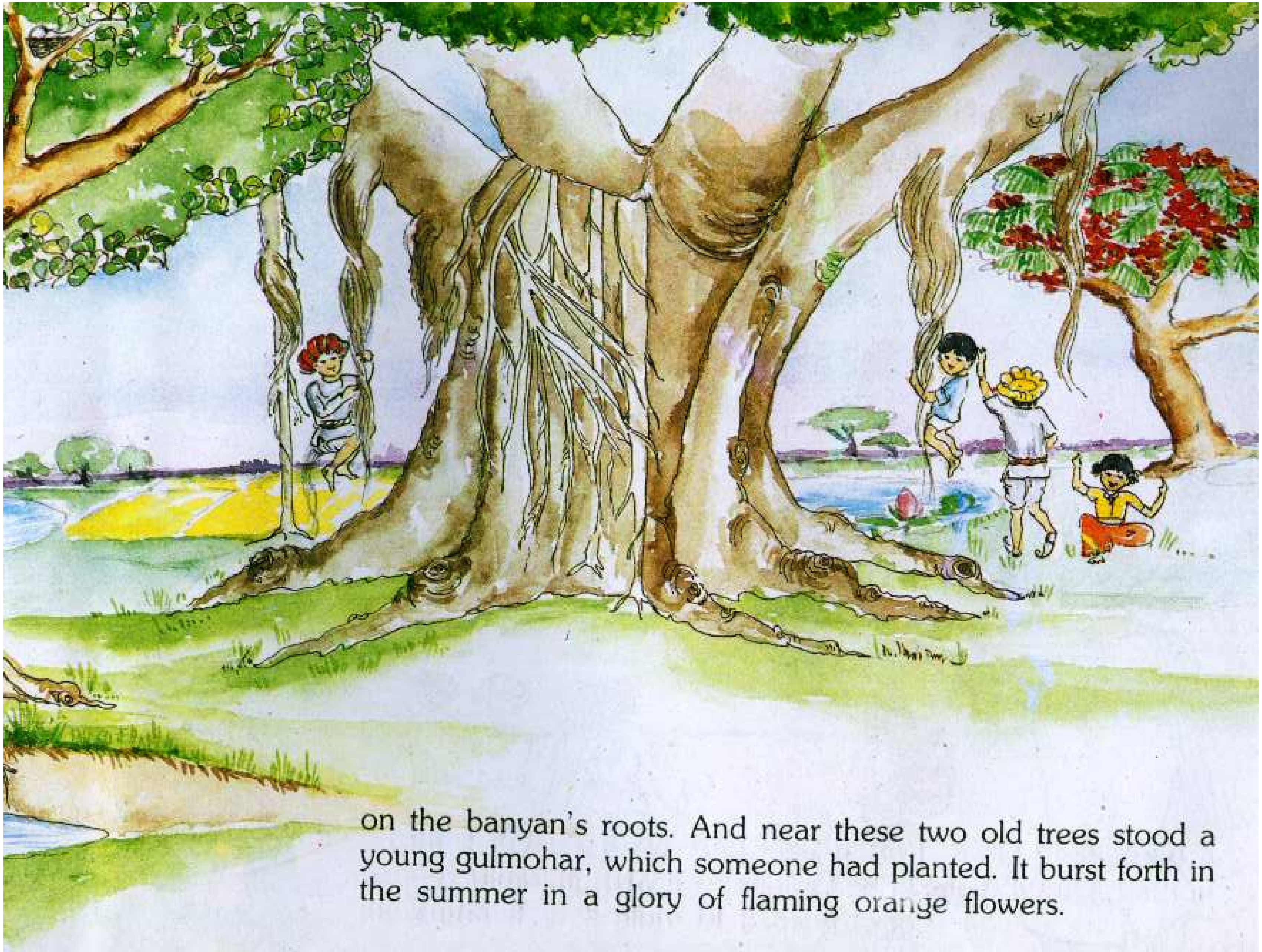
So they began to cut down the trees. The wise ones warned them, "Don't cut trees. They are our friends. They look after us. If you hurt them, trouble will befall you."

But no one listened and soon the forest became thin and sparse. All that was left standing were some clumps of neem and some thorn bushes.



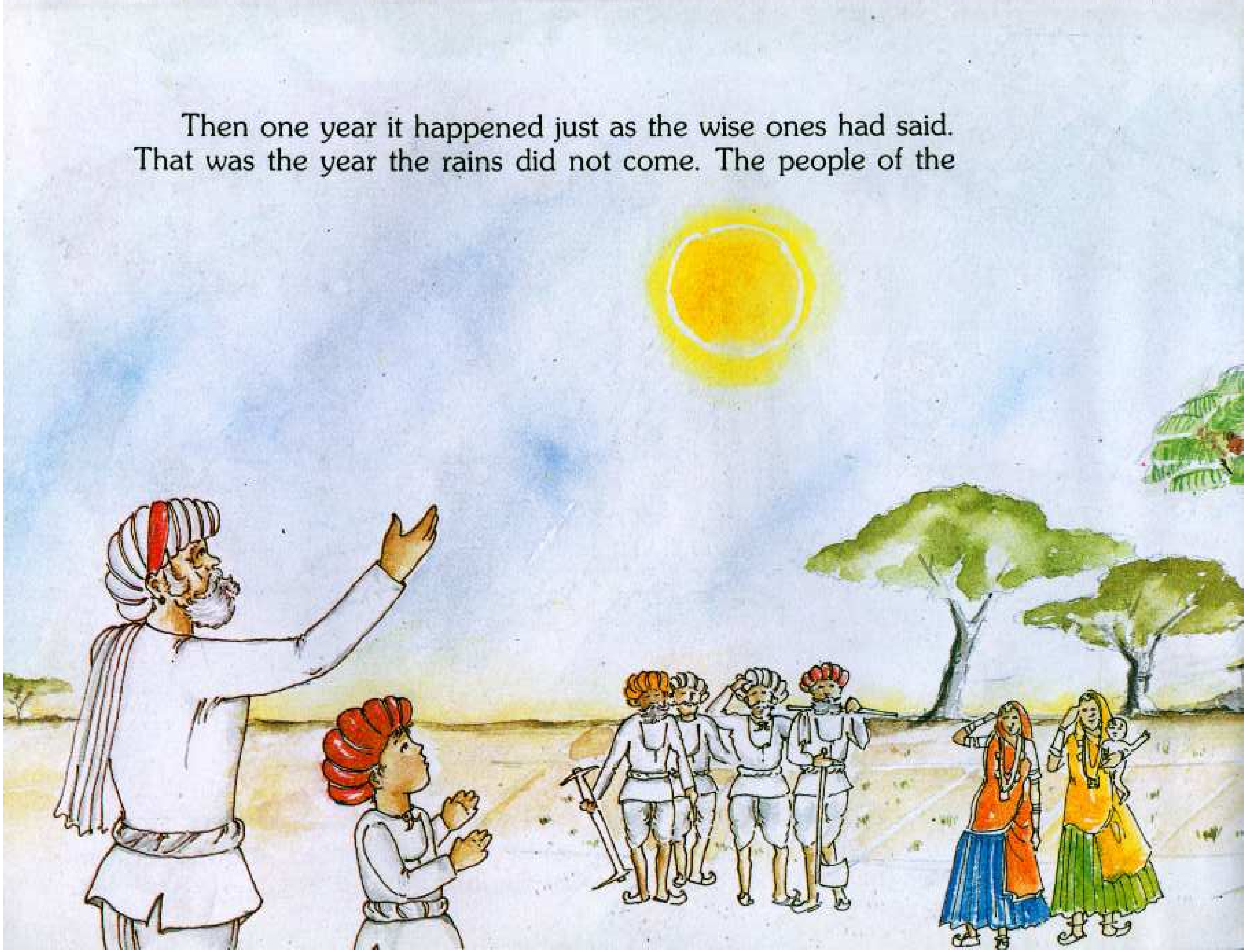
There were, however, two trees that stood firm in the centre of the village. One was a great peepul tree, so old that nobody knew its age. It put out young and tender heart-shaped leaves every year. Near the peepul stood a banyan, also full of years and wisdom, and in its hollow lived a colony of squirrels. Children loved to swing





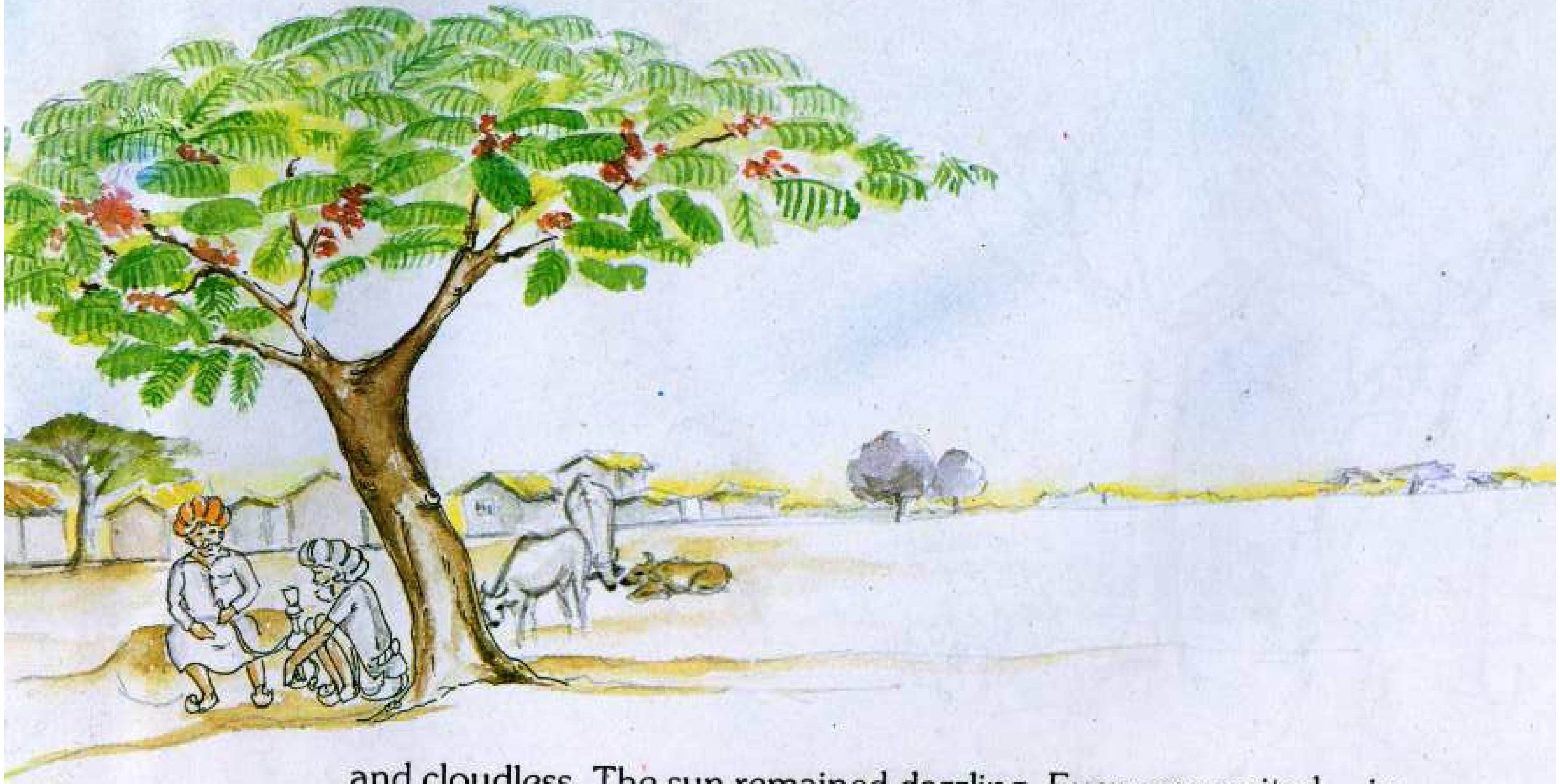
on the banyan's roots. And near these two old trees stood a young gulmohar, which someone had planted. It burst forth in the summer in a glory of flaming orange flowers.

Then one year it happened just as the wise ones had said. That was the year the rains did not come. The people of the



village looked up at the sky where the sun shone bright—too bright! "Perhaps the rains are late!" they said. They waited. But the weeks went by and the rains didn't come.

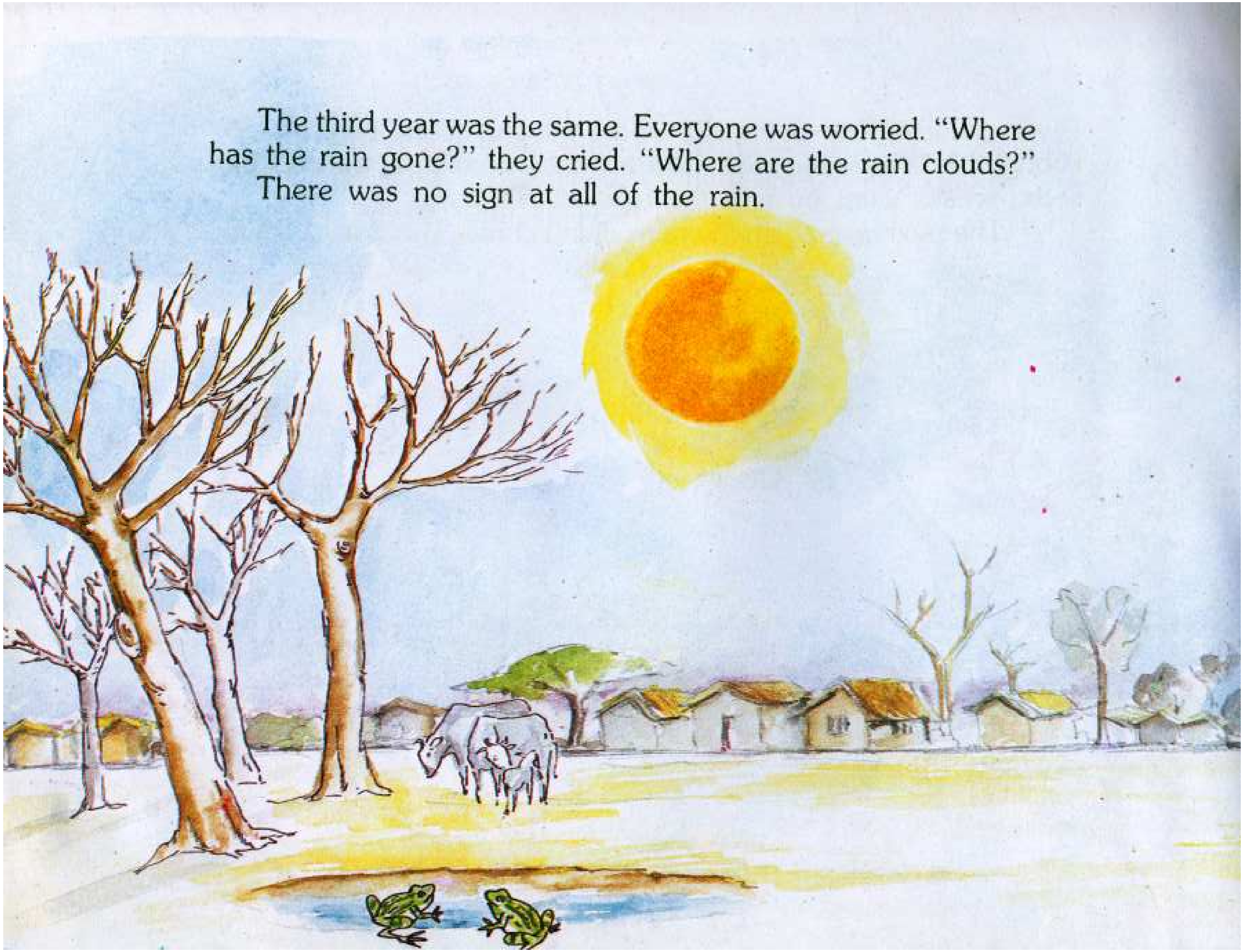
The next year again the rains didn't come. The sky was blue



and cloudless. The sun remained dazzling. Everyone waited—in vain.

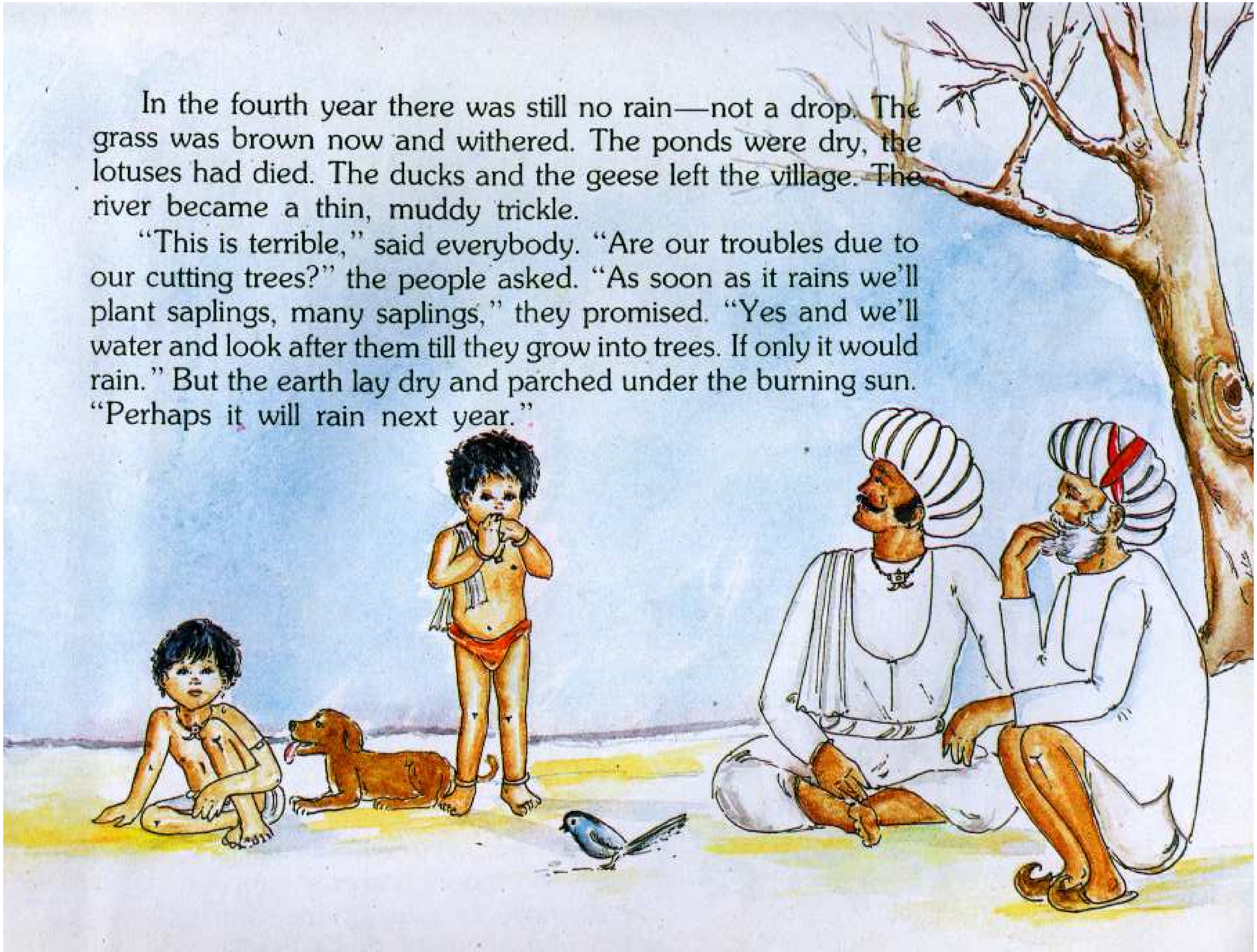
The third year was the same. Everyone was worried. "Where has the rain gone?" they cried. "Where are the rain clouds?"

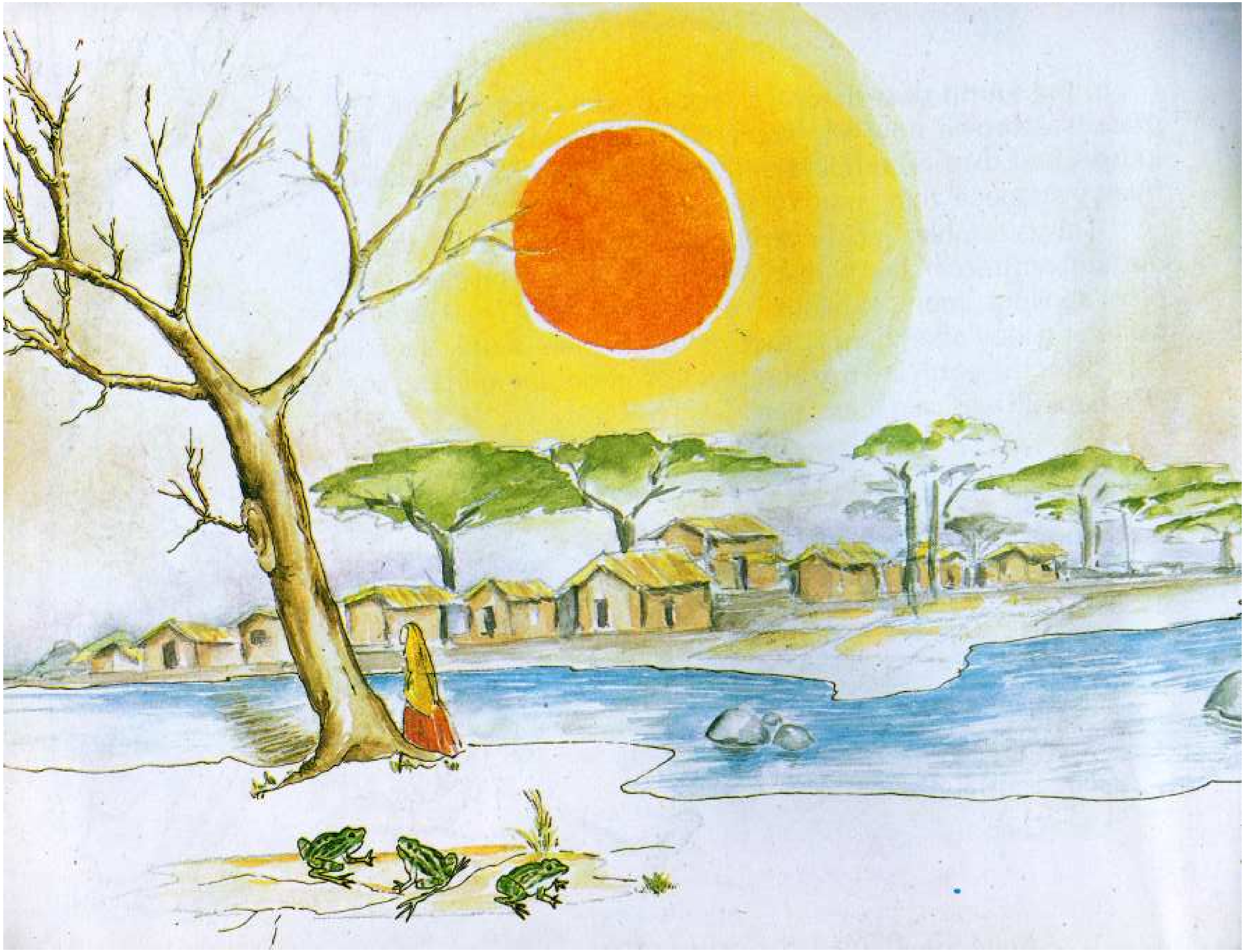
There was no sign at all of the rain.



In the fourth year there was still no rain—not a drop. The grass was brown now and withered. The ponds were dry, the lotuses had died. The ducks and the geese left the village. The river became a thin, muddy trickle.

"This is terrible," said everybody. "Are our troubles due to our cutting trees?" the people asked. "As soon as it rains we'll plant saplings, many saplings," they promised. "Yes and we'll water and look after them till they grow into trees. If only it would rain." But the earth lay dry and parched under the burning sun. "Perhaps it will rain next year."





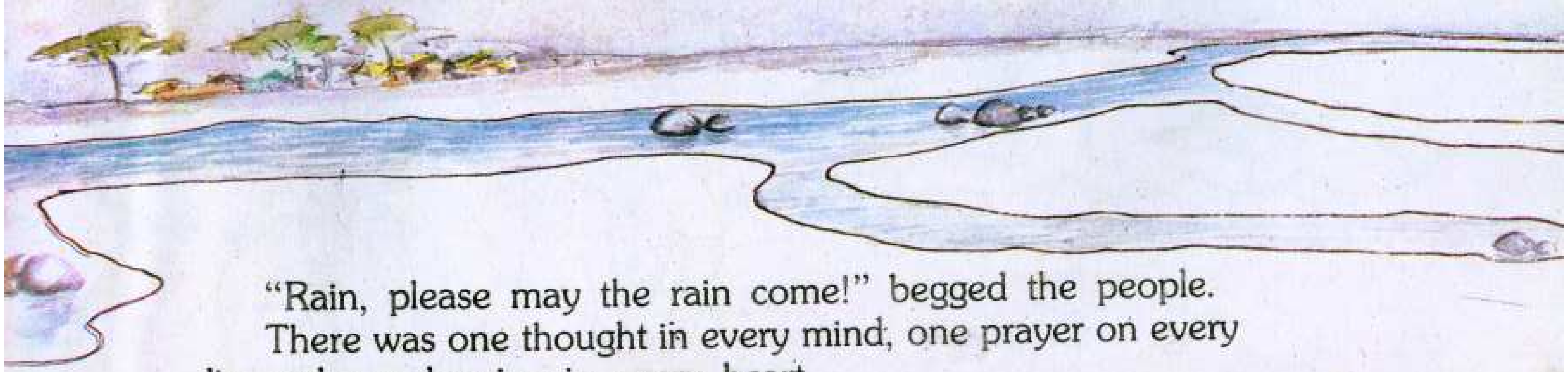
The next year the rains failed again.

"We'll die if there is no rain," cried everybody. The few trees shed their leaves and held up bare bony arms to the sky. The animals lay down silent and sad. "If only it would rain," twittered the birds. "Oh, if only..."

"Heaven send us rain," sobbed the thin muddy trickle that had once been the river.

"Rain! Give us rain," cried the holes that had once been ponds. "Rain, rain—rain," croaked the thirsty frogs. "Please come, rain!" pleaded the birds. "Rain—may we have rain!" echoed the animals.

"Rain, come down rain," prayed the empty fields.

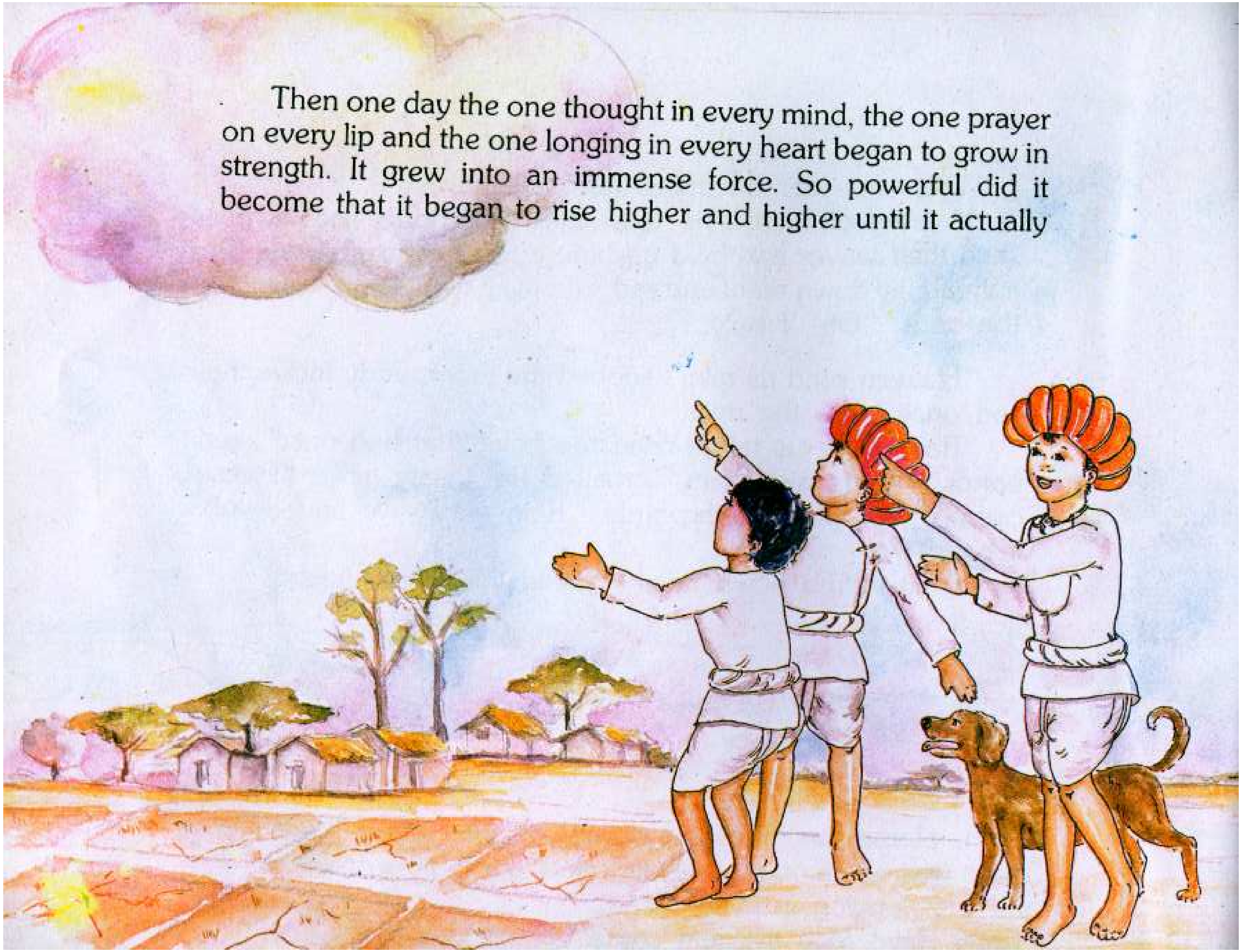


"Rain, please may the rain come!" begged the people.

There was one thought in every mind, one prayer on every lip and one longing in every heart.

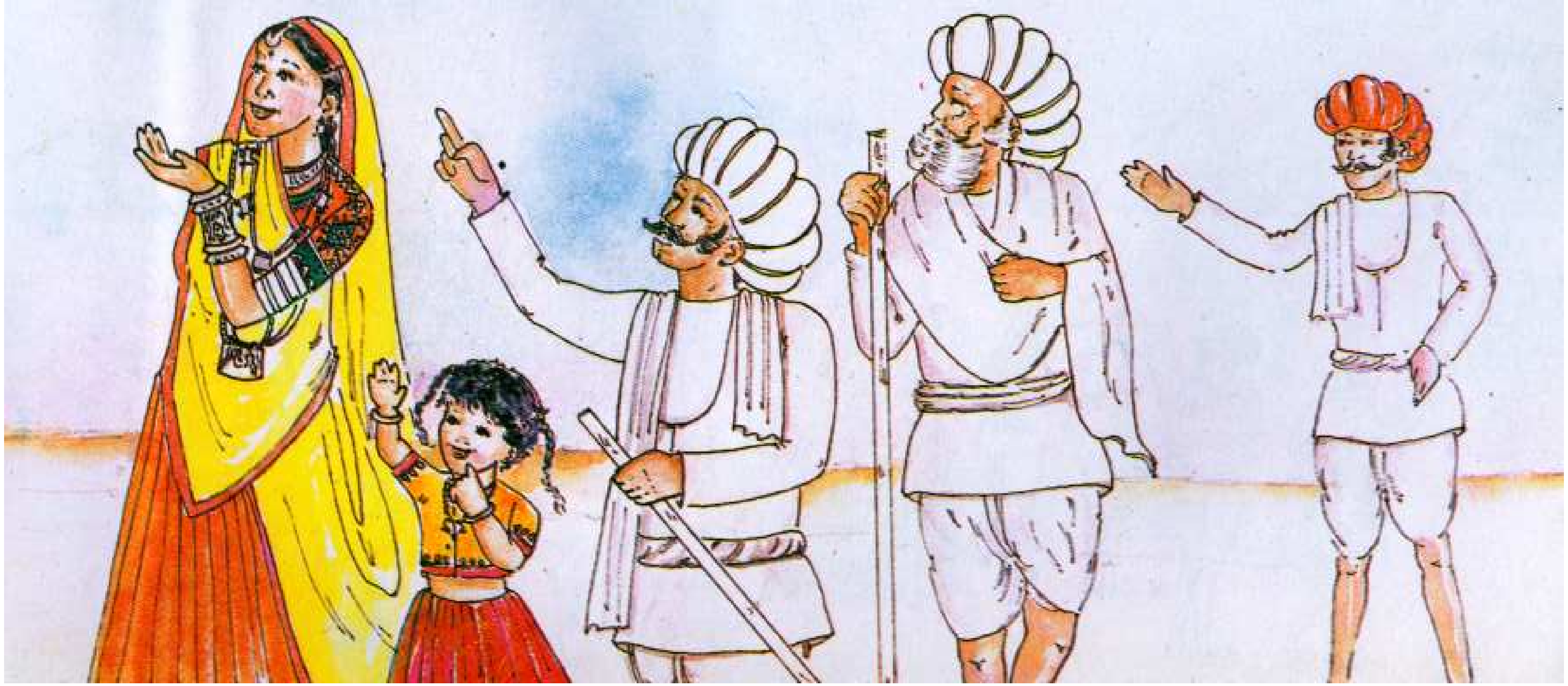
"Rain! Rain! May the rain come."

Then one day the one thought in every mind, the one prayer on every lip and the one longing in every heart began to grow in strength. It grew into an immense force. So powerful did it become that it began to rise higher and higher until it actually

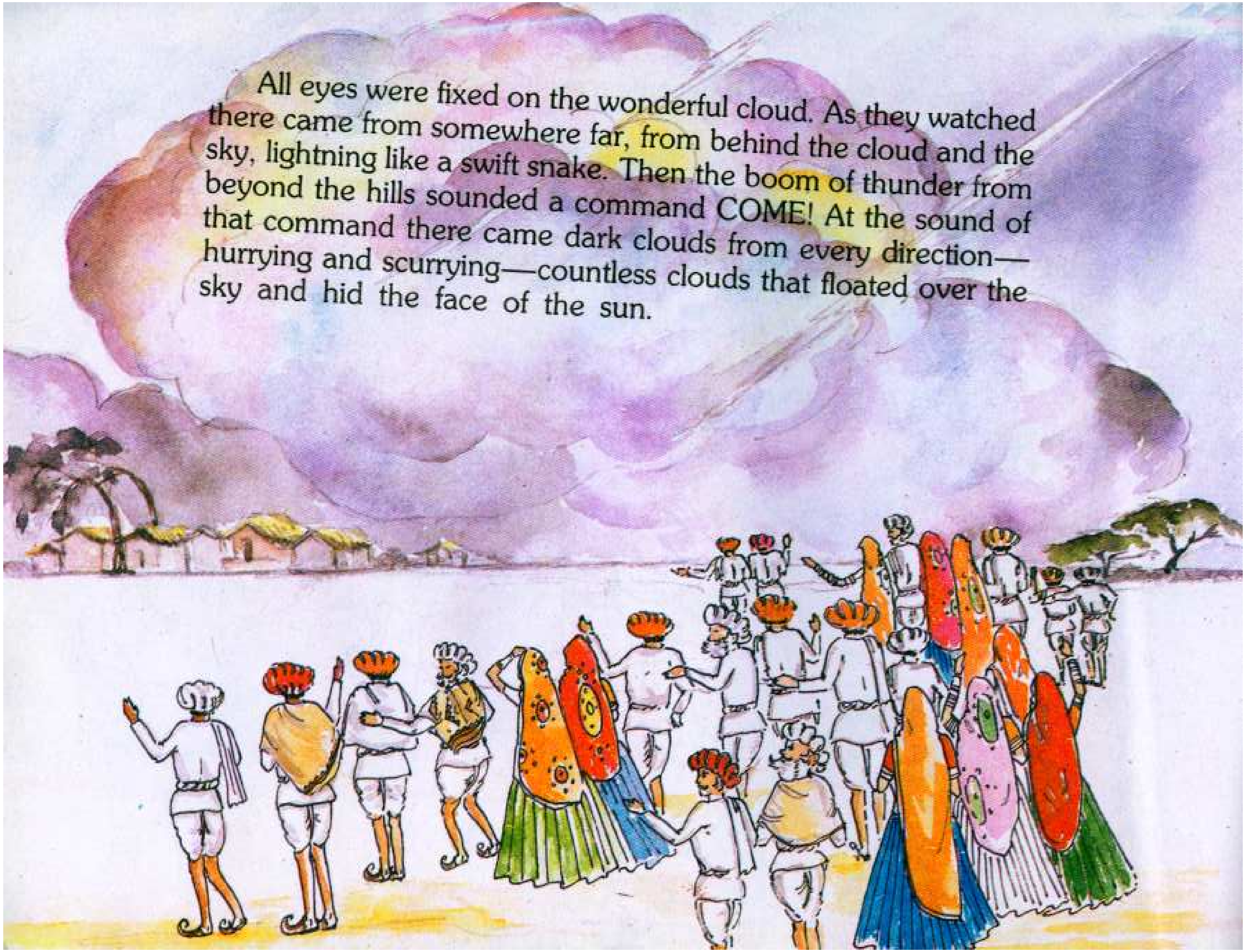


eached the sky. And there it became a shining silver cloud, very wonderful to see.

"Look," cried the people, gazing upwards. Even as they looked, the silver cloud turned to gold and the gold turned to many colours, pink and orange, yellow, green. red, rose, mauve and purple. Then the shifting colours came together and became grey, then black.

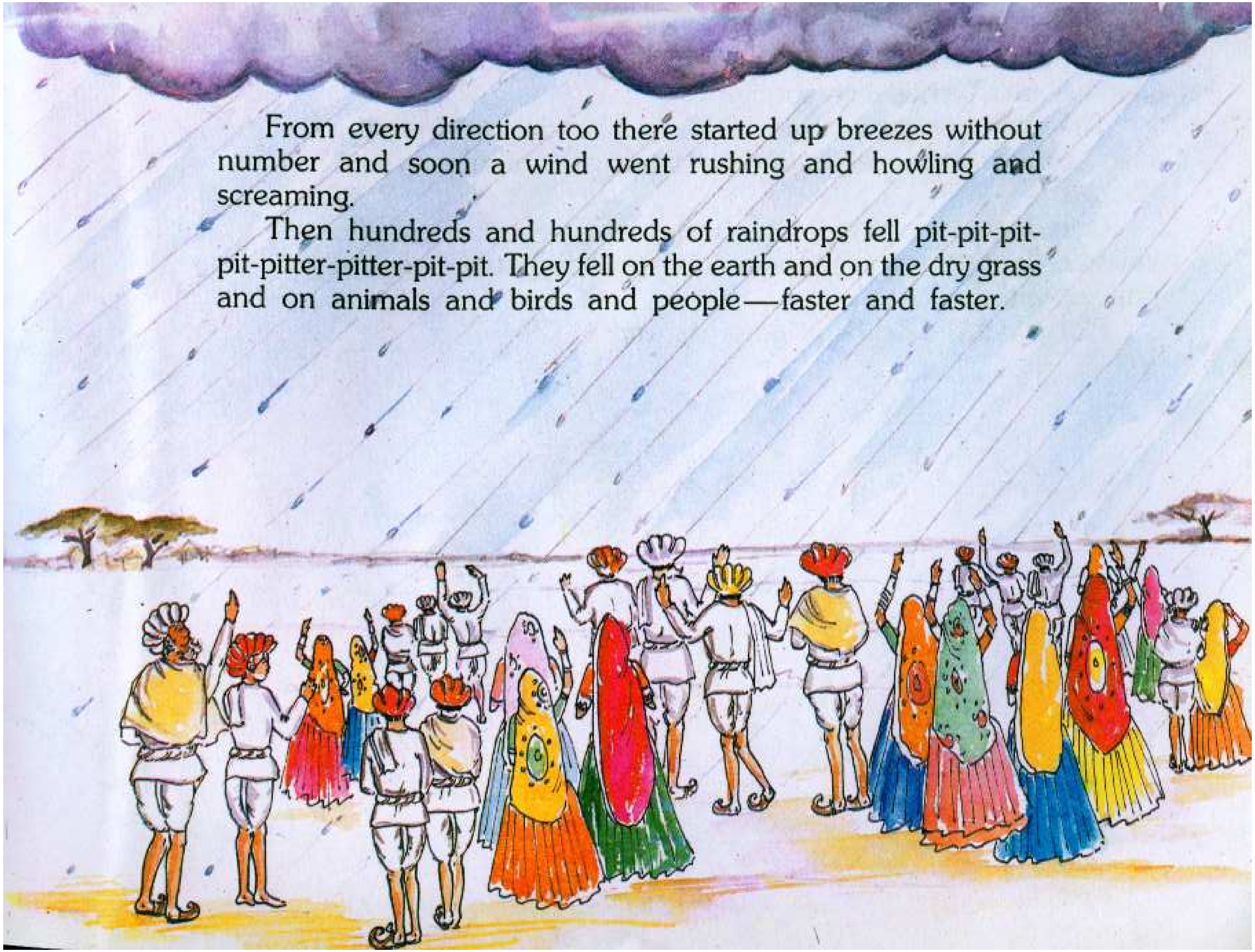


All eyes were fixed on the wonderful cloud. As they watched there came from somewhere far, from behind the cloud and the sky, lightning like a swift snake. Then the boom of thunder from beyond the hills sounded a command COME! At the sound of that command there came dark clouds from every direction—hurrying and scurrying—countless clouds that floated over the sky and hid the face of the sun.



From every direction too there started up breezes without number and soon a wind went rushing and howling and screaming.

Then hundreds and hundreds of raindrops fell pit-pit-pit-pit-pitter-pitter-pit-pit. They fell on the earth and on the dry grass and on animals and birds and people—faster and faster.

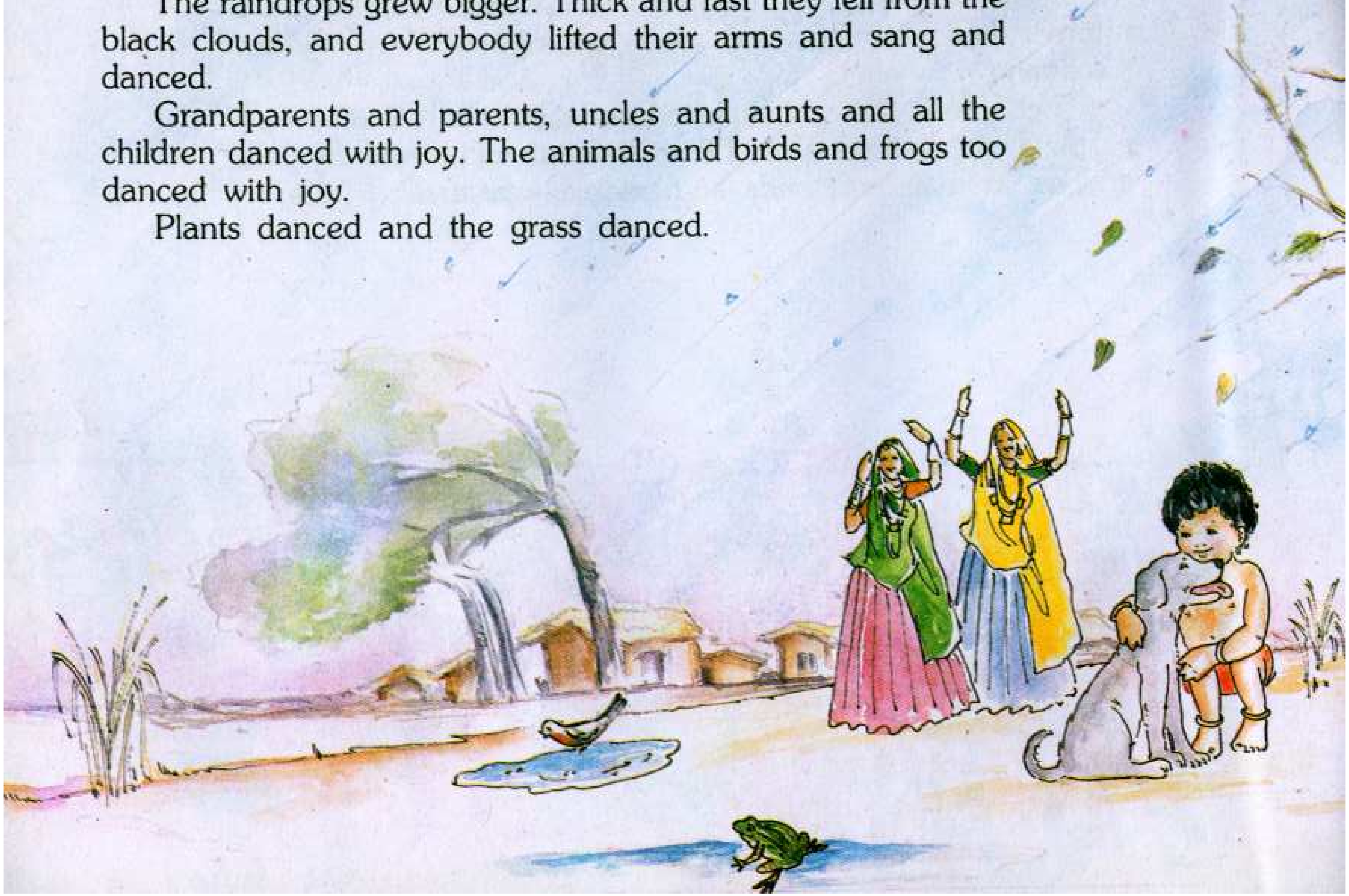


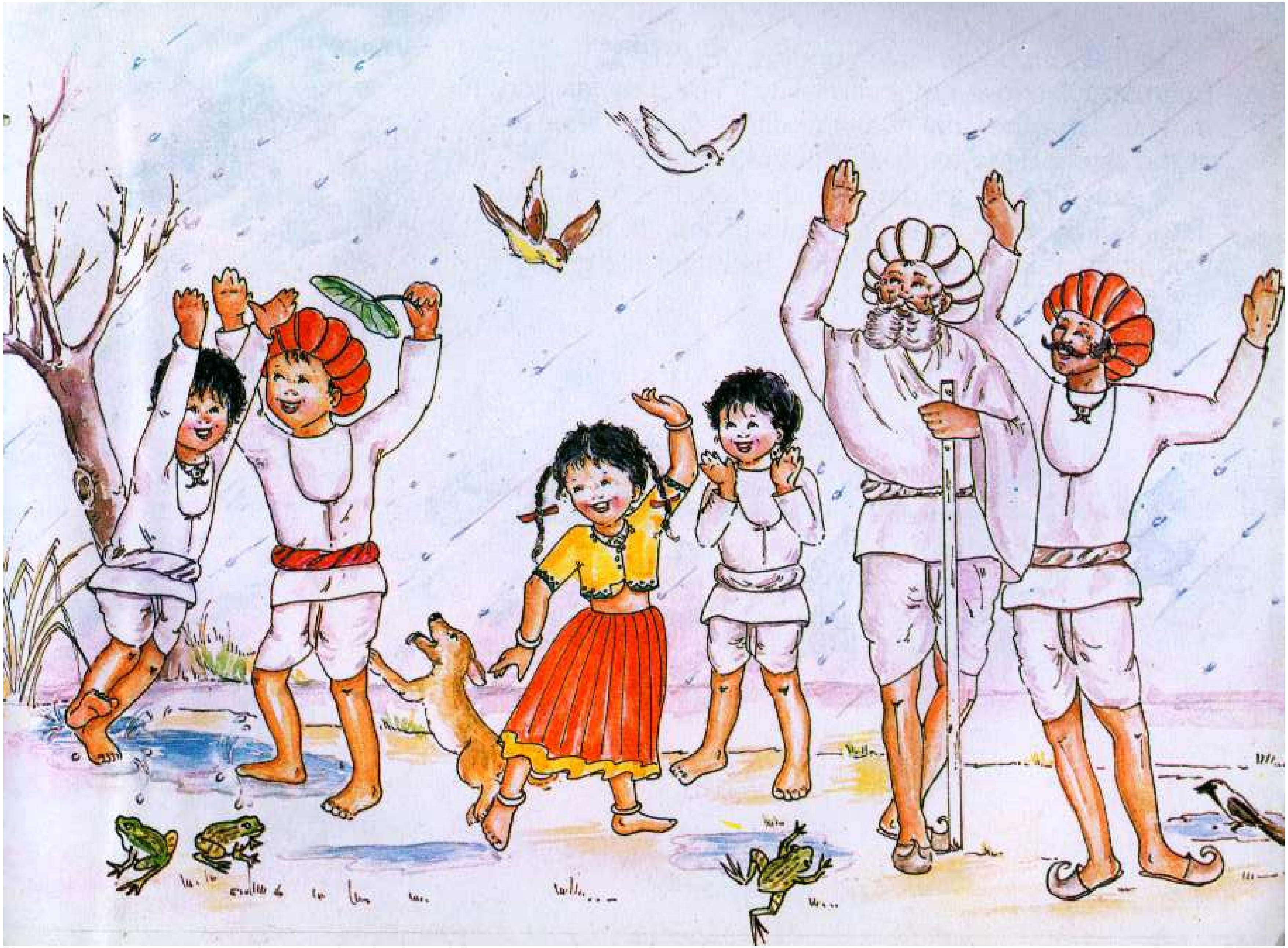
"Oh! the rain, the wonderful rain, the wonderful, beautiful, glorious rain," cried everybody.

The raindrops grew bigger. Thick and fast they fell from the black clouds, and everybody lifted their arms and sang and danced.

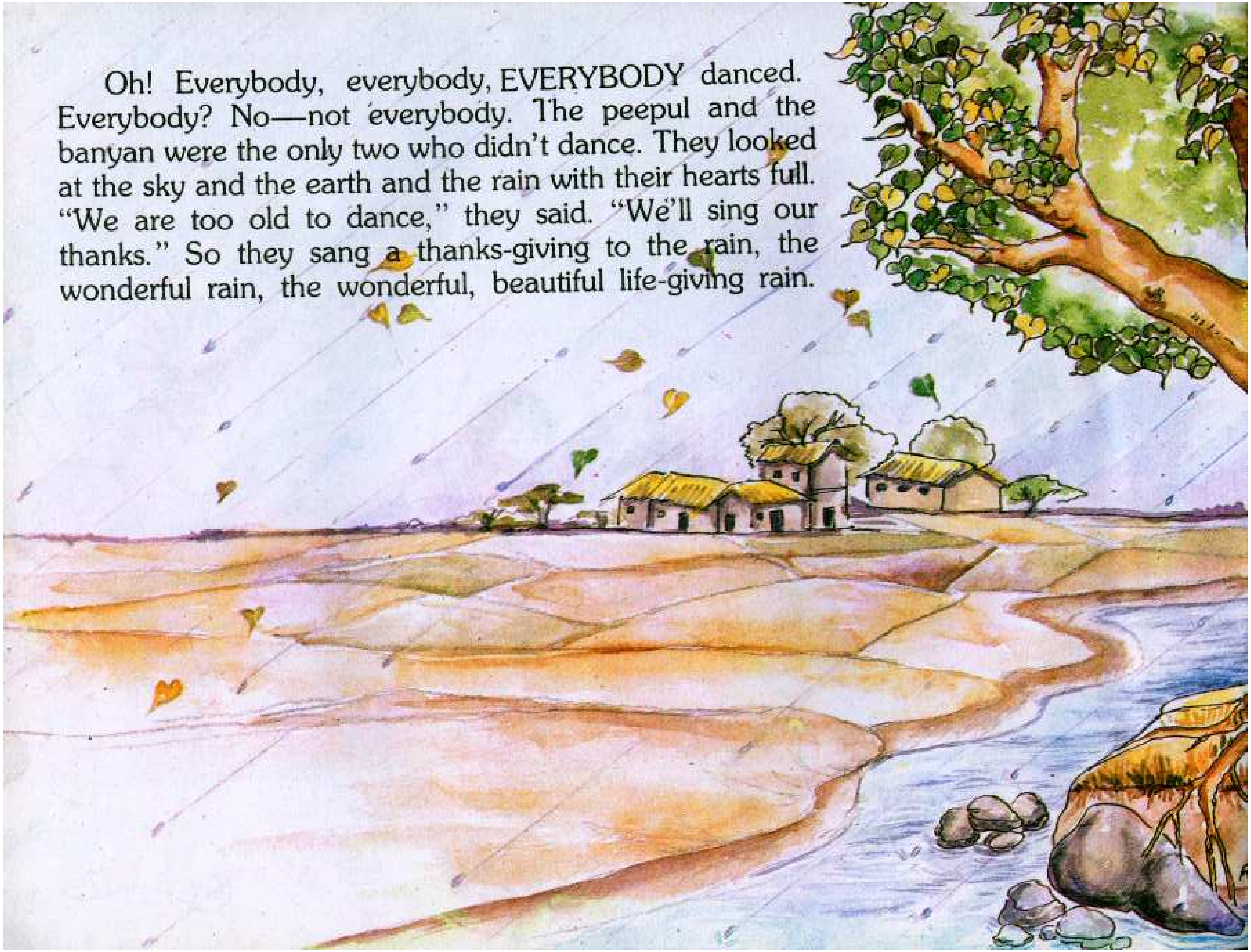
Grandparents and parents, uncles and aunts and all the children danced with joy. The animals and birds and frogs too danced with joy.

Plants danced and the grass danced.





Oh! Everybody, everybody, EVERYBODY danced. Everybody? No—not everybody. The peepul and the banyan were the only two who didn't dance. They looked at the sky and the earth and the rain with their hearts full. "We are too old to dance," they said. "We'll sing our thanks." So they sang a thanks-giving to the rain, the wonderful rain, the wonderful, beautiful life-giving rain.



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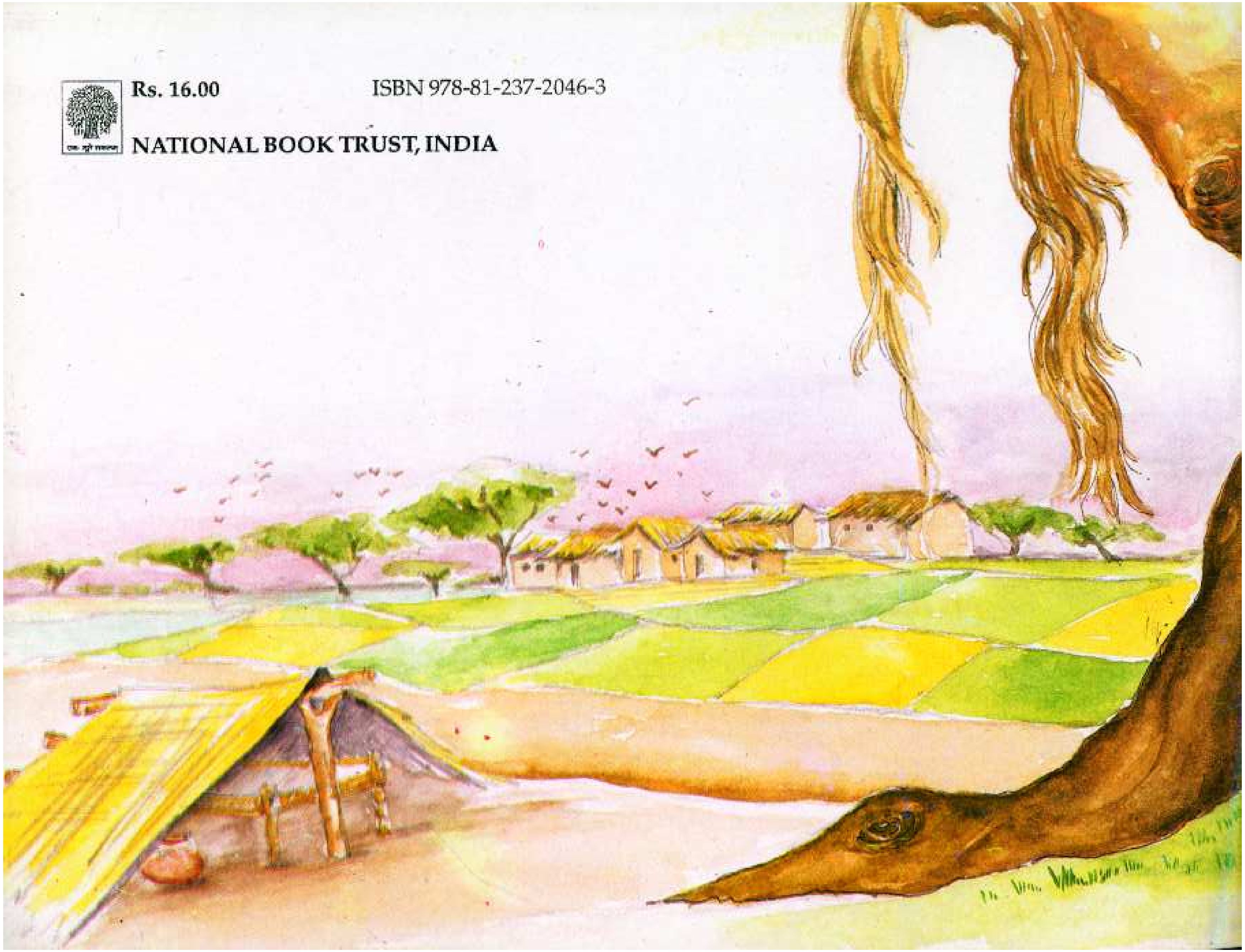NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA